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**THE ANGLO-BOER WAR: SURVIVING WHEN THE EMPIRE STRIKES
BACK**

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When representatives of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State voted on May 31, 1902, to accept the peace terms worked out with the British by their negotiators, they took pride in the stunningly effective war their "ignorant peasant communities" had waged against the army of the greatest empire in the world.¹ For two and a half years, Boer "commando" units had astonished professional observers by demonstrating that an irregular and decentralized force, equipped with modern weapons, highly mobile, and sensibly led, could hold its own against a vastly superior European army – at least for a while

The overall strategy and the guerilla tactics the Boer fighters implemented did not derive from formal study of the military classics at one of the new European military academies. Boer communities in the great South African interior tended to be isolated and inbred, the Boer leaders who were educated and cosmopolitan were businessmen or professionals rather than soldiers. Few Boers would have had the slightest familiarity with Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, or Jomini. Rather, the Boers developed a distinctive but highly effective form of warfare during 250 years of conflict with the native African tribes in the unforgiving South African veldt. Though the similarity was unintentional, and their forces not a conventional army, the manner in which the Boers fought against the Victorian British at the turn of the century (1899-1902) constitutes a classic case of war conducted according to the precepts delineated in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. If the experience of the Anglo-Boer war is representative rather than a historical anomaly, then Sun Tzu was right: a military force that operates according to his precepts will

successfully challenge the enemy. But what the Boer experience also suggests is that an outnumbered guerilla force fighting -- however brilliantly-- according to Sun Tzu or to Sun Tzu-like precepts can achieve a rough stasis with a superior enemy but cannot force a decisive victory, either in a particular battle or in the war itself. In the end, what Sun Tzu-type strategy and tactics got the Boers was enough attention and respect from the embarrassed and war-weary British political leadership to wring more of their political objectives out of the peace negotiations than the fighters otherwise could have hoped for.

The two Boer nations, the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State, declared war on the British empire in October 1899 for two reasons: first, to prevent British annexation of their independent countries into the rest of the crown territories in South Africa, and second, to maintain Boer culture and political control of the republics against the pressure of immigrating British settlers. Boer leaders did not make the decision to challenge the global superpower lightly. As conscious as Sun Tzu that war is "the road to survival or ruin," they took the time to analyze their chances and to prepare themselves for combat before attacking the British colonies to the east and south.² Boer leaders thoroughly understood Sun Tzu's point that knowing the enemy is a necessary pre-condition to successful warfare. They also took his corollary that subduing the enemy without fighting is the acme of political and military skill.³ Well-plugged into the London political scene, the Boers were seasoned manipulators of the British political dynamic. They followed Sun Tzu's dictum to divide the enemy by cultivating an influential band of sympathizers in the opposition Liberal Party to ensure that Boer views

¹ The description is from Winston Churchill, *The Boer War* (New York: W W Norton & Co, 1989), 32.

² Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 63.

were kept in front of British opinion-makers and the public. Boer activists also fomented strife between the Liberals and the governing Conservatives on South African issues (Note: Although the Liberals did not return to power in time to help the Boer cause, their voice was important in moderating the British terms for surrender.) The Boers also looked for opportunities in Britain's relationship with other European powers, concluding that the Boer cause had a sporting chance to win the support of France or Germany, states who might be willing to tweak the British in the hinterlands. As Sun Tzu observed, disrupting alliances was excellent offensive strategy.⁴

The Chinese theoretician advised would-be warring states to consider five factors in assessing their prospects for a successful war: moral influence, weather, terrain, doctrine, and command.⁵ The Boer experience suggests these are vital but not sufficient indicators of military success, given that the prospects for a Boer success appeared very good based on these five measures. Sun Tzu's "moral influence," defined roughly as popular support for the country's leadership in its conduct of the war, was an important source of Boer drive and determination. Although there were pro-British Boers and others who opposed the war, by and large the populations of the two republics were prepared to follow their leaders and were strongly motivated to provide Boer fighting forces with material and psychological support. The depth of the popular commitment to the cause was clearly demonstrated by the refusal of so many Boer families to give up under the harsh terms of Lord Kitchener's scorched earth policies in 1900 to 1902. As for the factors of weather and terrain, the home team Boers naturally had a decisive

³ Ibid, 84, 77

⁴ Ibid, 78

advantage over foreign fighters After more than two centuries of on/off struggles with native tribes, they were experts at gauging what Sun Tzu calls “the conformation of the ground” and fighting in the extreme weather of the South African veldt

Sun Tzu’s final determinants for success, doctrine and command, can be examined in the Boer War context given some latitude for the effects of history and technological innovation In doctrine, which Sun Tzu defines as the organization, control, and supply of forces, the Boers followed the spirit if not exactly the letter of his principles With his emphasis on practicality and proven effectiveness, Sun Tzu would have appreciated that the Boer command structure not only contributed to the remarkable morale of the Boer fighters and civilians but was a flexible military tool that enabled the Boers to fight and often prevail against staggering odds (Boer forces, which may have totaled somewhere between 60,000 and 75,000, probably never exceeded 40,000 in the field at any time The British began with less than 20,000 but escalated to 250,000 by the end of the war) The commando structure, which organized all adult men into relatively small district-based groups under the nominal leadership of democratically elected officers, had developed out of the Boers’ experience in fighting the native tribes The commando structure relied on the competence of the individual fighter and the practical experience of the localized group rather than the abilities or military genius of a general The Boer force was less a single army – though it did have an overall commandant and was able to carry out a unified strategy over the entire geographic area under its control – than an alliance of committed local units. An emphasis on success in battle rather than formal organizational structure combined with the downward delegation of authority

⁵ Ibid , 63

offered opportunity to those commando fighters who demonstrated command qualities. The commando leadership corps in toto was remarkably able and provided a striking contrast to its British counterpart⁶

The weapons used by the commandos were a crucial factor in the Boers' capacity to handle themselves in an unevenly matched conflict. Boer political and military leaders had anticipated that the empire's access to considerable reservoirs of manpower and materiel would be a telling and perhaps even an unbridgeable advantage if the war did not end quickly. To compensate for their limited manpower, the Boers bought every material advantage that advanced weapons manufacturers could provide for the potential underdog. Winston Churchill was among many chagrined British participants to recognize too late that not only had the Boers "neglected nothing" in outfitting themselves for the coming clash, possessing the most advanced rifles and artillery available, but the South Africans had also "utilized the best expert opinion" in training for the use of these weapons.⁷ The deadly advantage technology gave to the Boers was evident from the skewed death rates throughout the course of the war.

The way the Boers conducted the guerilla war is virtually a textbook example of Sun Tzu in action, especially in terms of his emphasis on deception, cunning, surprise, speed, and intelligence as force multipliers. The loosely confederated Boer army was obviously unsuited to large-scale complicated campaigns, as Sun Tzu advised, Boer

⁶ The commando structure has been extensively investigated and described. For a good summary, see Ian Knight and Gerry Embleton, *The Boer Wars (2), 1898-1902* (London: Osprey Books, 1996), 7-13.

⁷ Churchill, *Boer War*, 32.

military chiefs avoided frontal confrontations with superior British forces⁸ Instead, the Boers planned offensive action based on their most outstanding capabilities unmatched mobility, phenomenal marksmanship, intimate knowledge of the terrain, and excellent intelligence Skillfully exploiting these advantages, the Boers increased the fog around the British forces, boosted friction, and waged psychological warfare against the demoralized troops “All warfare is based on deception,” commented Sun Tzu “When near, make it appear that you are far away, when far away, that you are near”⁹ The Boer forces kept the British off-balance for most of the war Outdoorsmen and experts in survival in the rough veldt, Boer commando units were reportedly capable of covering up to sixty miles a day on their ponies, day after day, while their enemy, generally unhorsed until the end of the war, moved on foot The Boer mounted fighters were legendary for their ambushes, their hit-and-run attacks, and their elusiveness when hunted. Formidable Boer marksmanship heightened what Sun Tzu called the negative “moral factor” of the British So did the Boers’ use of smokeless powder, which hid the positions of ambushing fighters and increased fear and panic in the British ranks, as well as the Boers’ unsporting but definitely unnerving tactic of firing from camouflaged trenches

The Boers’ skillful collection of intelligence and cunning use of misinformation were prime weapons in their efforts to keep the British off-balance and insecure Sun Tzu stressed the importance of “foreknowledge” as a key to successful battle, the Boers also thoroughly appreciated the advantages that good intelligence and espionage provided

⁸ Sun Tzu, *War*, 80

⁹ Ibid , 66

their war effort.¹⁰ Operating in their own territory, with the active supports of thousands of Boer families scattered throughout the war area, the Boers made intelligence collection a force multiplier, both an offensive as well as a defensive weapon. The British, in contrast, were slow to understand the value of intelligence – however ungentlemanly a practice – and paid a heavy price for it.

The Boers didn't get everything right. They made what Sun Tzu would have predicted were serious mistakes and they did so for reasons he would have considered inimical to successful warfare. The commandos typically did everything they could to avoid casualties – behavior one would expect in small groups composed of related men and neighbors from the local district. While this had a plus side (an outnumbered force, reluctant to incur casualties, resorted to smarter tactics to beat the odds) it also made the Boers reluctant to go on the offensive. They did not like to get out of their defensive positions or to follow-through a successful ambush with a risky attack. As Sun Tzu pointed out, the possibility of victory lies in the attack, not the defense.¹¹ This caution also fed into the Boers' proclivity for sieges. Sun Tzu specifically advised against attacking cities on the grounds that an assault on a walled compound was a sure way to lose a good portion of the army.¹² During the brief period at the start of the war when Boer forces outnumbered the British army, the Boers wasted time and initiative blockading garrison towns. Not only did they win no military advantages from these sieges (the towns were relieved in the spring of 1900) but also press and eyewitness

¹⁰ Ibid , 145

¹¹ Ibid , 85

¹² Ibid , 78

reports of the hellish conditions in the starving garrisons cost the Boers some advantage in international opinion

So why, if the Boers were being as imaginative as Sun Tzu could wish regarding deception and intelligence, if they were using every technological advantage to the fullest, if they were mobile and smart and tactically adept, didn't they get the payoff Sun Tzu promises? Why didn't they win the war? The British -- whose inept leadership during the first part of the war became the joke of Europe, who were consistently outgunned and outmaneuvered by the Boers, whose doctrine was outmoded, who were arrogant and disorganized and too frequently just plain awful in the field -- were able to convince the Boers to give up the fight without decisively beating them. How?

One of the main reasons is that the British offered fairly good terms: the Boer republics lost their independence, but maintained a considerable degree of autonomy and self-rule. To some extent, then, the Boers gave up because they achieved an acceptable number of their political objectives.

They were of course weary and tired of fighting. The Boer commandos were not professional soldiers and wanted to return to their farms. The problem with this explanation as the main impetus for the surrender is that the Boers surrendered from a position of considerable strength, not only were they fielding a force of more than 20,000 in mid-1902, but the most successful commando leaders wanted to keep fighting.

Part of the answer may be found in Sun Tzu . The Chinese master assumed that both forces would be major armies, i.e., he does not anticipate the situation in which one of the forces may implement his precepts but never be strong enough to attack with any expectation of a decisive success. Except during the very first days of the war, the British always had sufficient forces to recover from Boer assaults, however costly the attack might be. By 1902 the British outnumbered the commandos by a factor of over ten to one. Militarily, the Boers could make the British forces bleed but they couldn't make them bleed to death. Because of the mismatch in forces, the British could prevent any particular engagement with the Boers from becoming the decisive battle. No matter how skillfully they fought, and using all of Sun Tzu's force multipliers, the Boers could bring the British to a standstill but could not drive them out of the country. Sun Tzu isn't much help in this situation. The only recourse for the Boers would appear to be breaking the political will of the British – and by 1902 that possibility was increasingly remote.

In addition, Sun Tzu is unclear on what strategy one should adopt when the enemy becomes wise enough to fight according to the same precepts. As the war went on, the British realized their error in thinking that the Boer capital cities or any one portion of the commando force was the center of gravity they needed to crush. The guerilla forces were too dispersed, and the cities meant little. The only real center of gravity in the Boer guerilla war was the will of the people. To crush that will, the British decided to (a) hit at the home front, and (b) use guerilla tactics against the Boer fighters. Beginning in the summer of 1900, the British launched a scorched earth policy that included incarceration of Boer families into concentration camps. Targeted at the morale

of both the homefront and the fighting forces, this policy had a very significant impact on the Boers' enthusiasm for continuing the fight. The British also began to organize and train irregular units in the same guerilla tactics used by the Boers. By the spring of 1902, as Boer negotiators were meeting with their British counterparts, the British guerillas were enjoying increasing success.

The Boer guerillas, experienced and motivated, might have been able to handle the limited number of guerillas the British were able to put in the field – except for the fact that the British still had a large conventional army and were using this army with increasing vigor and effect as an occupation force. The commandos had no comparable force to secure a hurl against this army. The guerillas were inevitably running out of places to hide and they didn't have the force to get the enemy off their necks. No Sun Tzu tactics could get them out of that predicament.

Following extensive grassroots discussions, the decision to surrender was put before sixty Boer delegates in late May 1902. After two days of emotional discussion, the vote was 54 to 6 to accept the terms.¹³

¹³ The Boer War has been extensively covered by British and South African historians. In addition to the works already cited, the following works provide background and analysis of the conflict: Jay Stone and Erwin A. Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1988), Michael Barthorp, *The Anglo-Boer Wars* (London: Blandford Press, 1987), Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York, Random House, 1979).